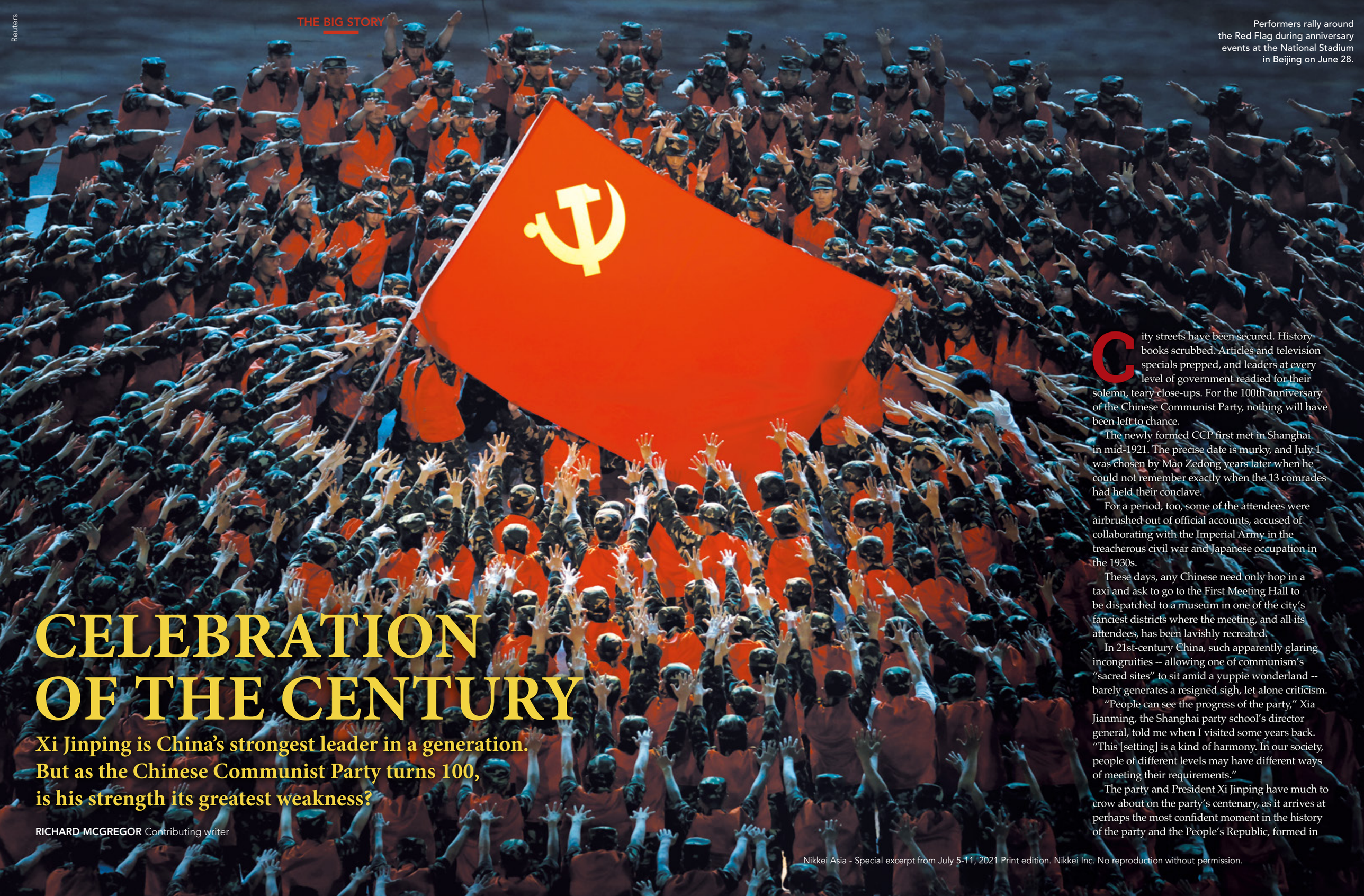
Reuters



Performers rally around the Red Flag during anniversary events at the National Stadium in Beijing on June 28.

CELEBRATION OF THE CENTURY

Xi Jinping is China's strongest leader in a generation. But as the Chinese Communist Party turns 100, is his strength its greatest weakness?

RICHARD MCGREGOR Contributing writer

City streets have been secured. History books scrubbed. Articles and television specials prepped, and leaders at every level of government readied for their solemn, teary close-ups. For the 100th anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party, nothing will have been left to chance.

The newly formed CCP first met in Shanghai in mid-1921. The precise date is murky, and July 1 was chosen by Mao Zedong years later when he could not remember exactly when the 13 comrades had held their conclave.

For a period, too, some of the attendees were airbrushed out of official accounts, accused of collaborating with the Imperial Army in the treacherous civil war and Japanese occupation in the 1930s.

These days, any Chinese need only hop in a taxi and ask to go to the First Meeting Hall to be dispatched to a museum in one of the city's fanciest districts where the meeting, and all its attendees, has been lavishly recreated.

In 21st-century China, such apparently glaring incongruities -- allowing one of communism's "sacred sites" to sit amid a yuppie wonderland -- barely generates a resigned sigh, let alone criticism.

"People can see the progress of the party," Xia Jianming, the Shanghai party school's director general, told me when I visited some years back. "This [setting] is a kind of harmony. In our society, people of different levels may have different ways of meeting their requirements."

The party and President Xi Jinping have much to crow about on the party's centenary, as it arrives at perhaps the most confident moment in the history of the party and the People's Republic, formed in

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13

Attendees of the Communist Party's first meeting in Shanghai in 1921

1949 after the communist's civil war victory.

What once might have been seen as a fatal contradiction has been turned by the party into a core strength, a reminder that Xi sits atop not just the biggest political party in the world, but the richest as well.

The party celebrates its 100th anniversary not just as a survivor, although that is important in itself. Some historians might argue that North Korea's Workers' Party, formed between 1948 and 1949, slightly exceeds it as a communist administration in governing longevity in Asia, but the Kim dynasty rules over an impoverished mendicant state.

The party, in power for 72 years, will soon surpass in longevity the state it was modeled on, the Soviet Union, which collapsed in 1991, after 74 years. The moment the CCP passes this landmark will be celebrated, too, though more quietly.

But if this is a nervous moment for China's rulers, their fears are well concealed. "The East is rising; the West is declining," goes a saying that has gained popularity in Beijing this year, reflecting a country brimming with confidence, if not hubris.

FOLLOW THE MONEY In the past decade, China and the party have prospered in the face of the global financial crisis as Western nations struggled. They have seen off former U.S. President Donald Trump and the instability he spawned. In just the last year, after the bungling of the outbreak of COVID-19 in Wuhan, Chinese growth has rebounded faster than any other major economy.

In modern times, China's people have never been richer, its industries more advanced and its military stronger.

Most strikingly of all, the party has pulled this off while adhering to and nurturing steadfast loyalty to Marxist-Leninism, a credo and philosophy discarded, derided and occasionally outlawed in the high councils of government in developed nations.

However modern China's economy might be, the political system is traditionally communist. Every leader of any influence and standing is a CCP member. There are no opposition parties, and no open competition is allowed for high office.

"The consistent argument that the party makes for its systems of institutions includes the case that socialism is better at marshaling collective effort for development, a claim Xi frequently evokes today," said Daniel Tobin, of the National Intelligence University.

To be sure, this is socialism with Chinese characteristics, Deng Xiaoping's flexible formula that allowed the CCP to strengthen single-party rule even as it liberalized the economy and made room for a vibrant entrepreneurial sector.

The formula has been reshaped by Xi, who is overseeing the construction of a hybrid economy in which the public and private sectors are increasingly pushed to work as one.

Xi is a singular leader in at least one respect. Unlike his predecessors, including Mao Zedong, Xi has no discernible rivals nor identifiable successors, mostly because he has used his power to make sure that none can emerge.

His anti-corruption campaign, the largest since China opened its economy to the market in the early 1980s, has targeted families and factions that had been free to exploit their standing and connections to get rich.

Like both Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao before him, Xi decried the corrosive impact that rampant corruption was having on the party and its governing legitimacy.

Only Xi did something about it, albeit with self-interest in mind, as the campaign also removed rivals from leadership roles and intimidated up-and-coming officials or groupings that challenged his illiberal agenda.

The anti-corruption campaign deployed the party's internal policing unit and its untrammeled powers to kill off other enemies as well, closing down dissent from the reformers in the legal professions, media and in economic policymaking.

But Xi's singular status clouds a larger truth, that his agenda embodies the core of what the party has always wanted to do, which is to eliminate opposition at home and project power abroad, especially in Asia.

Essential to both targets is a successful economy, which builds legitimacy with the local populace and provides the financial foundation for a military with the firepower to dominate the region and keep the U.S. at a distance.

The party's involvement in commerce once made it, as one Chinese academic quipped, akin to "the world's biggest holding company." But those old jokes, about the party being "a giant chamber of commerce" and the "world's largest mixed business," are passe in the era of a strongman like Xi.

Entrepreneurs have been officially welcomed as party members since the 2002 Party Congress. As their wealth and business clout has grown, so has Xi's determination to discipline them and make them subordinate to the party.

All roads lead back to the party under Xi, as Jack Ma -- founder of e-commerce giant Alibaba Group Holding, one of the country's richest men, and one of its best-known and liked public figures -- has found out in recent months.

In late 2020, Ma criticized financial regulators ahead of the listing of Alibaba's payments arm, Ant Group, for an estimated $35 billion. He was quickly summoned to Beijing and the listing canceled. Ma has barely been seen in public since.

Ma made many fortunes for executives who worked with him and for investors who put money into his company. But none have spoken up for him since his fall. Privately, their attitude is cool and unsympathetic. He should have known better, they say.

Other tech billionaires have got the message and quietly

Xi Jinping sits atop not just the biggest political party in the world, but the richest as well

For Chinese President Xi Jinping, the CCP's centenary arrives at perhaps the most confident moment in the history of the party and the People's Republic. AP

The many lives of China's Communist Party

A century of near-death experiences has reinforced Mao's dictum that "Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun."

1921: Chinese Communist Party founded in Shanghai with about a dozen members, but grew rapidly into a formidable political and military force amid the chaos of inter-war China

1935: A strategic retreat in the face of the nationalist forces known as the "Long March" ends at the mountainous region of Yan'an, which became the CCP's headquarters until seizing power over a decade later

1949: Mao Zedong proclaims the People's Republic of China on Oct. 1 in Beijing; Chiang Kai-shek's defeated Nationalist-led government flees to Taiwan in December

1966-1976: The Cultural Revolution plunges China into near civil war, as Mao unleashes the teenage Red Guards on his enemies in the CCP; schools close and the country disintegrates to near anarchy before the People's Liberation Army moves to restore control

1976: Mao dies; a bid to seize power by the "Gang of Four" is defeated and they are arrested, paving the way for reformer Deng Xiaoping to take leadership of the party

1978: "Reform and Opening up" policy begins the transformation to three decades of rapid economic growth and market reforms with farmers allowed to use their land as they see fit

1989: The PLA crushes a protest encampment on Tiananmen Square on June 4, killing hundreds or more, and ending all efforts at political reform

2012: Xi Jinping becomes head of the Communist Party, and president the next year; after two decades of thaw, China's political climate under Xi begins to freeze over again, with stricter censorship laws and dozens of rights activists jailed for subversion

Source: Nikkei Asia research; source photos by Getty Images

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92 million
CCP members currently

Source: Statista

resigned or stepped off the public stage.

Xi's attitude to billionaire entrepreneurs was summed up in a quote in The Wall Street Journal. "Xi doesn't care about if you made any of those rich lists or not," a senior Chinese official said. "What he cares about is what you do after you get rich, and whether you're aligning your interests with the state's interests."

Xi's view -- that there can be no powerful person, group or set of interests independent of the ruling party -- is no different in substance from Liu Shaoqi's vision for the CCP and country in his 1939 essay, "How to Be a Good Communist."

"The test of a Party member's loyalty ... is whether or not he can subordinate his personal interests absolutely and unconditionally to the interests of the Party, whatever the circumstances," wrote Liu, a onetime head of state and a potential successor to Mao. (Mao later turned on Liu, and left him to die in the Cultural Revolution.)

VEHICLE OF HISTORY Xi's party has many more subtle and insidious ways to keep an eye on the loyalty of members, let alone the population, that were not available even 10 years ago. Real-time tracking on phones, facial recognition, the monitoring of spending patterns and other tools deliver a rich stream of data unheard of to previous autocrats.

But Xi is old-fashioned in how he harks back to Marxist-Leninism in a far more trenchant and dogmatic fashion than his immediate predecessors.

The party's Leninist organizational framework has been strengthened under his leadership. So too has the Marxist notion that the party is both an instrument and vehicle of history for China to regain its place as a global superpower.

In editions of Qiushi, the CCP's flagship ideological journal whose title translates as Seeking Truth, Xi's articles in the lead-up to the anniversary have focused on collections of his quotes on history.

"Through the learning of history, it is not difficult to find that without the leadership of the CCP, the country and the Chinese nation could not have made today's achievements and could not have obtained today's international status," Xi wrote in an article in June.

Anyone who questions the party's word on history and the revisions that have gathered pace under Xi runs the risk of going to jail. Querying party history and the official pantheon of party heroes embedded within it amounts to the crime of "historical nihilism."

In April, the Cyberspace Administration of China, the chief internet regulator, encouraged online citizens to report anyone who "maliciously slanders and distorts" party history.

Like Hu Jintao and Jiang Zemin, who preceded him as party general secretary, Xi has ordered rank-and-file members to study the demise of the Soviet Union as an abject lesson of the fate that awaits a weak party.

But for all its attention to learning lessons from the wreckages of other communist states, the CCP is increasingly focused on the road ahead rather than the rearview mirror. Once, it was content with building and defending socialism within its own borders. Now, the CCP sees a global playing field for its endeavors.

"[China] offers a new option for other countries and nations who want to speed up their development while preserving their independence," Xi said in his address to the 19th Party Congress. "And it offers Chinese wisdom and a Chinese approach to solving the problems facing mankind."

Xi's statement, little noticed when it was made in 2017, has blossomed into a small cottage industry. Spearheaded by the Belt and Road Initiative and multiple efforts to take over the leadership of international organizations, Beijing's promotion of its model as an alternative form of governance has gone mainstream.

"For most of the world's developing and less developed countries, China's major moves in development have made them eschew Western models," said Wang Wen, a prominent state ideologue, on the eve of the anniversary.

Wang points out that about 100 countries have gained independence since World War II but only a handful of economies, including South Korea and Taiwan, have reached middle-income status. "If it happens," he said, "China, as a country with a population more than 20 times bigger than South Korea, will have a greater effect and play a more important pilot role in reaching the high-income stage."

To be sure, few argue that the Chinese model can be transported lock, stock and barrel to other countries. China's party-state is arguably unique, melding centuries-old bureaucratic habits with the software developed by Vladimir Lenin to govern the Soviet Union.

But the China model, or aspects of it, are being exported in multiple different fashions, be it through a yearslong effort to remodel the United Nations and other international institutions, or in a quasi-commercial fashion through the adoption of Chinese-industrial standards.

Huawei Technologies, the pioneering and privately run Shenzhen-based telecommunications giant, for example, has signed up hundreds of cities around the world to its smart cities program, which offers both tech and surveillance services. Along with Chinese-style internet monitoring, it is small wonder that such deals have been branded as "authoritarianism in a box."

The extension of the reach of Beijing and the party-state abroad is running in parallel with a more assertive foreign policy posture, the so-called wolf warrior diplomacy, named after a hit Chinese movie about coming to the rescue of citizens abroad.

Chinese diplomats in Sweden, France, Australia, Brazil and the U.S., and from the podium in the Foreign Ministry, have launched

> [China] offers a new option for other countries and nations who want to speed up their development while preserving their independence
>
> **Xi Jinping**
> Speaking to the 19th Party Congress

Getty Images

> China's party-state is arguably unique, melding centuries-old bureaucratic habits with the framework developed by Vladimir Lenin to govern the Soviet Union.

Getty Images

A girl waves the national flag at Wuhan's Garden Expo Park on June 25.

The leaders

The Politburo Standing Committee, the Chinese Communist Party's highest decision-making body, has seven members and is the pinnacle of the world's largest political party.

Xi Jinping *(68)*
President and party general secretary

Turned 68 in June, the customary retirement age for the party's top mandarins, but he has signaled his intention to stay in power for quite some time. China amended its constitution to scrap a two-term, 10-year limit on the presidency in 2018.

Politburo Standing Committee members

Li Keqiang *(65)*
Premier

Directs and oversees the State Council, China's top administrative body, and has authority over economic policy. Has lost influence as Xi has tightened his grip on power.

Li Zhanshu *(70)*
Chairman of National People's Congress Standing Committee

Essentially chief of staff and one of Xi's closest allies. Played a behind-the-scenes role in the president's anti-corruption crusade and in making him the "core" leader. Ranks third in party hierarchy.

Wang Yang *(66)*
Chairman of People's Political Consultative Conference

Supports Xi as head of the country's top advisory body. Once played a key role as top trade negotiator, but now focuses more on domestic issues, including ethnic affairs. Ranks fourth in party hierarchy.

Wang Huning *(65)*
Chief of the Secretariat

Oversees the party's ideology and propaganda division. A former professor at Shanghai's prestigious Fudan University, he studied in the U.S. and is also fluent in French. Ranks fifth in party hierarchy.

Zhao Leji *(64)*
Head of Central Commission for Discipline Inspection

Succeeded Xi's longtime ally Wang Qishan as graft czar. Served as party chief in Shaanxi Province -- Xi's ancestral home -- and developed close ties with future president's family. Ranks sixth in party hierarchy.

Han Zheng *(67)*
Vice Premier

Top official responsible for Hong Kong affairs and an active player in Belt and Road Initiative. Worked for about 40 years in Shanghai before moving to Beijing. Ranks seventh in party hierarchy.

Ages as of June

Source: Nikkei; source photos by Reuters

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China's economy is

75

times larger today than it was in 1980

Source: World Bank

acerbic attacks on their Western critics using language once only heard behind closed doors.

The wolf-warrior phenomenon has split Chinese foreign policy experts, with many decrying it as a counterproductive appeal to domestic nationalists at the expense of diplomacy and the national interest.

But for the moment it has the ascendancy. Senior Chinese diplomats staunchly defend aggressive diplomacy, even as they acknowledge that its target is rallying support for the party-state at home rather than persuading interlocutors abroad.

"Westerners accuse us of not conforming to diplomatic etiquette," Lu Shaye, China's ambassador to France, said in an online interview in June. "But the standard for us to evaluate our work is not how foreigners look at us, but how people in China look at us, whether it is in the interests of our country and people, whether our people are satisfied or not, and whether they promise or not."

As ambassador to Paris, Lu called a French critic a "little hyena." His embassy also suggested that elderly patients in French retirement homes had been abandoned to die from illness and hunger.

SUCCESS WITHOUT SUCCESSION? China's party-state faces enormous challenges as the likelihood of confrontation with the U.S. and its allies lurks.

Growth will naturally slow as the economy matures and the easy motors of new output, like urbanization, run out of gas. The environment has been degraded, and the problems of securing water will grow along with the challenges of climate change. Relations with the developed world are increasingly hostile, over issues like Hong Kong, Taiwan and the Uyghur ethnic group in Xinjiang.

China's demographic crunch is also at hand. The workforce is already shrinking. Some parts of the country, like the old rust belt in the northeast, are hemorrhaging young people and will struggle to get back on their feet.

But perhaps China's weakness cannot be measured by these traditional metrics. Put another way, what if the core weakness is Xi and the cult of personality he has created, and the rigid diktats of the party itself?

The conventional view of many in democracies is that China does economic reform but not political reform. In other words, the economy has been liberalized and opened up to competition but the political system has not.

From a Chinese perspective, this is wrong. In fact, there has been a load of political reform since Deng Xiaoping took over in the late 1970s, and it has been, on Chinese terms, highly successful.

Deng started a process of putting in place checks and balances throughout the Chinese system to limit the power of individual officials, most notably a cascading set of retirement ages to ensure that no one person hangs on to one position for too long.

In addition, most top provincial positions are held by officials from outside the provinces they are appointed to lead, to make sure that local interests are subordinate to central government policies.

The cornerstone of these reforms was de facto terms limits on the top position in the country, that of party general secretary, a reform that gradually took hold, with the aim of preventing another dictator like Mao from taking over.

The CCP in effect solved the big problem faced by most authoritarian states, of how to ensure a peaceful transfer of power. No one benefited from this reform more than Xi himself, who took over the party leadership, the military and the state presidency in 2012 and 2013.

Xi has now thrown that reform out by ending terms limits for the presidency, which in turn removes them for the post of party general secretary as well. Apart from a few of his cronies, everyone else in the system remains subject to retirement ages, but he has made himself leader in perpetuity.

For many in China, this is a frightening prospect, and a dangerous one, because no one now knows what comes next.

If Xi dies in office, or becomes incapacitated, or is weakened by a major crisis, the party could be overtaken with a major succession crisis.

Such internal ructions and the instability that comes with them would not have mattered much for the rest of the world in Mao's day. But with China on track to becoming the world's largest economy and a major military power with unsettled territorial disputes, a Chinese crisis would be destabilizing well beyond its borders.

It would be wise not to underestimate the survival instincts of the CCP. Certainly, it relies on repression to rule when need be. But the party is alert to public sentiment, constantly fine-tuning policies in response to the information it receives through feedback, the media and reports written by state journalists and circulated privately.

Many foreign observers thought the party would not be able to keep pace with the increasing complexity of Chinese society without undergoing fundamental changes itself.

Not only has the party proved them wrong, under Xi it has gone backward, to the type of strongman rule that even highly placed insiders in China thought was gone.

On the anniversary of the party, there are no challengers on the horizon, not to Xi nor the system itself. N

Xinhua/AP

Xi, center, and other Chinese leaders review the Communist Party admission oath on June 18.

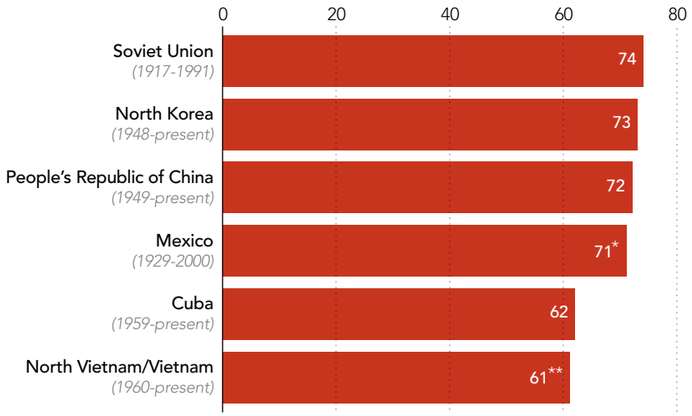
Unlike his predecessors, including Mao Zedong, Xi has no discernible rivals or identifiable successors.

AP

Party on

China will overtake the Soviet Union's life span in two years, though North Korea will continue to lead it in longevity. But do single-party authoritarian states have a natural life span? The data suggests they do.

The longest-lived authoritarian single-party states to date *(In number of years)*



**Mexico was governed from 1917 by many of the same personalities that created the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) in 1929. Thus, according to some definitions, single party rule in Mexico extended 83 years.*
***The Vietnamese Communist Party is deemed to have consolidated power and vanquished other competing political forces in North Vietnam by 1960; thus, single-party rule dates from then.*
Source: Bjørnskov-Rode database of Regime Types and Regime Change

> **[T]he standard for us to evaluate our work is not how foreigners look at us, but how people in China look at us**
>
> **Lu Shaye**
> China's ambassador to France

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